Carol J. Carter
Author and student success expert
Early College and Beyond: Success for More Low-income Students
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Last week, HuffPost Live hosted a discussion on the merits of early college programs for low-income students. The National Early College Initiative describes early college high schools as schools that provide an opportunity for higher education attainment for low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education. By the end of early college high school, students earn a high school diploma and Associate's degree at no cost to the student. There are roughly 400 programs in the United States right now serving 100,000 students. The support for this model is growing and there are pros and cons as this movement expands. There are three groups of low-income students who could potentially go to college.

- Top tier students in programs like early college.
- Students with talent, who with exposure and rigor, could get ready to succeed in college.
- Unprepared students ushered into college who spend the first 1-2 years in remedial courses.

Schools like the Bard High School Early College, where 95 percent of graduates matriculate to a four-year college, feature a selective application process which evaluates the results of math and writing assessments before interviewing students to attend based on their maturity, intellectual curiosity, and love of learning. The student body is diverse with students from as many as 50 different countries who come from both high- and low-income families. Alternative schools like this teach with the focus and quality required for students to make a successful transition from high school to college.

Dayton Early College Academy in Dayton, Ohio, where 100 percent of graduates go on to pursue higher education, features similar strengths. DECA's mission is to prepare urban students with the skills to enter college and be the first to graduate in their family. Unlike Bard, DECA is a charter school with open enrollment, which features a rigorous curriculum not all students can manage. Even for those who can't make the grade at DECA after a year, they return to more mainstream schools with stronger academic skills and much more exposure. DECA sets itself apart from traditional public schools with its academically challenging curriculum and emphasis on college and career skills, like study habits, business etiquette, and public speaking. Dave Taylor, DECA's principal, is leading the charge to improve education through strong elementary and middle school instruction, summer reading, enrichment, advisory, and effective teacher facilitation skills.

The virtues of early colleges such as Bard and DECA are many:

Low-income students get exposed to college-level work while they are in high school.

Students receive an Associate's degree at no cost to the student, and many are incentivized to earn their Bachelor's.

Students begin to see the merits of college, how to understand themselves, harness their abilities, and follow through despite tough odds.

Top notch faculty and coaches work with students on both their habits of mind and their academic abilities through strong critical thinking, deep learning, significant reading, and current technology skills.

This model works in discrete, highly measured learning labs such as the schools described above. Such models can improve the poor college success rates for low-income first-generation students, a crisis both personal and economical in the U.S.:

30 percent of all first-year students are first-generation.

24 percent are both first-generation and low-income.

The majority -- 89 percent -- of low-income first-generation students leave college within six years without earning a degree. These students are four times more likely than higher income second-generation students to drop out of college after their first year.

With a tight focus, the high-quality standards that schools like Bard and DECA set can be realized for more students as these schools grow in size and grow strategically in number. However, perhaps the best way for the early college model to grow is as a highly selective program for first-generation students within a public school district.

If the early college movement expands among traditional public schools as fast as AP courses and dual enrollment programs have, we may not be able to control quality in ways that are critical for college success. The college preparedness problem high schools face is not due to a lack of college-level courses they offer; it's that low-income students are too often rushed into the more rigorous AP courses, early college programs, or remedial college courses when they haven't yet mastered high school. Increasingly, the "college-level courses" low-income students are exposed to in traditional public schools are remedial college courses in math, writing, or reading.

I'm all for high school students taking a couple of college classes before they graduate from high school, but we are kidding ourselves if we expect the experience gained from taking a remedial college course will prepare students for the rigors of college-level work.

The Bards and the DECAs are the exception, not the rule. Because their criteria are so rigorous, they are able to uphold college standards for low-income and first-generation students. For other students who are rushed into looser models of accelerated courses, we are setting unrealistic expectations for what is ahead and racing students through a process that doesn't often match their social, emotional, commitment, and maturity level. In the push to move developmental education courses in math, reading, and writing into the high schools from the community colleges, we are putting the cart before the horse.

In a survey conducted by the ACT, 89 percent of high school teachers thought their students were ready for college, while only 26 percent of college instructors rated students "well' or "very well" prepared for college-level courses. Priority one: Let's first get more high school students excelling in high school before they enter college.

Today, 52 percent of U.S. college graduates are working in jobs that don't require a college degree. Perhaps there is a connection between this lack of preparedness for the college transition and the lack of skills college grads have for the workforce. The U.S. has 3.9 million job openings with a nearly eight percent unemployment rate. Certainly, some of this gap is due to the recession; however, a good part is due to not having enough high-skilled workers to fill today's jobs.

For the majority of students, the college readiness solution is not to bring college-level coursework to high school, but rather enrich and reinvent the high school years as rigorous onramp for college. Between 1972 and 2006, high-income families increased the amount they spend on enrichment activities by 150 percent, and in the same amount of time low-income families only increased spending by 57 percent. The larger group of Title 1 students who attend traditional high schools can increase their college preparation level in and out of school through access to experiences that are similar to those that higher-income students receive, such as:

Placement in IB or AP classes for the high-achieving high school student.

Summer enrichment classes which take place on college campuses taught by college professors and co-taught by college seniors who are role models for low-income students.

Intense summer reading programs which match private school reading expectations with online completion requirements for which students could earn chits for college readiness.

Schools with discrete focus in art, STEM, the trades, and other areas can continue to tap into students' unique interests and abilities as they discover what they would like to study and do professionally.

If the early college movement becomes the top tier of college access for first-generation students -- say 10 percent of that audience -- and an additional 40-50 percent can be inspired through these other more broad methods of exposure, then we can prepare two groups of students for success at elite private colleges, state schools, and community colleges. More, we will be practical in our efforts to narrow the gap between low-income and middle-income students who succeed in college, graduate, and go on to create successful careers and lives. It's not about getting into college; it's about succeeding while you're there and long after.